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Free Churches and the Weekly Offertory.

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SERMON

PREACHED IN THE CHURCH OF THE MESSIAH, BOSTON, ON THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, A. D. 1872,

BY

7549.118

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PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

Boston:
A. WILLIAMS & CO.
Church Bookstore,
135 WASHINGTON STREET.

Miss Hellen Freeman Clarke.
Oct. 14, 1897.

PRESS OF
C·R·M ARVIN & SON

FREE CHURCHES

AND

THE WEEKLY OFFERTORY.

REVELATIONS xxii. part of verse 17.

"*And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.*"

IT is the message of the Spirit and the Bride, the Holy Ghost and the Holy Church, to a world of thirsting souls. The fountain has been opened, yea, in the *smitten Rock*. The voice cries, "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come." From age to age, from priest to priest, in the long succession, from every temple-door, from every altar and every font, as from each open Bible, and each lifted cross, there ever rises the one great promise, that whosoever will may freely take the water of eternal life. This is but the prolonging of His word Who said, "Whosoever cometh unto Me, I will in no wise cast out;" and, "Whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die." In that "whosoever," in that "freely," the inner life of the Gospel is both enshrined and revealed. Then, its outer ministrations, and plans, and services must accord with this inward spirit of mercy and freedom, and grace and love. To a

prodigal humanity, at its mad revel, or in the tattered robe of its poverty and defilement, is whispered the pledge of a perfect pardon and an everlasting peace. Then the way of return must be freely shown, and the doors of the Father's house freely opened, and a free place assured where baptismal waters flow, and the chalice of mystic grace is ready, for the soul and the lips which have murmured, "Father, I have sinned."

Here then, my beloved, the argument, if one should be asked, for Free Churches, may start. The temples must be free because the Gospel and the salvation which it offers, and the Sacraments which it supplies, and the hopes which it inspires, because these are free. There was something deeper than mere stinging satire in the quaint preacher's word who announced his text, "To the poor the Gospel is preached," and changed the theme, at once, because no poor were ever likely to be present within those spacious walls. For them there was no room in that holy inn of rest and refreshment, as there was none for the Blessed Virgin and the most Blessed LORD in that Jewish inn of old. Or, there was only some remotest spot, marked and designated, it may be, where the "poor man in the vile raiment" might listen to St. James's word, and wonder if this were indeed a Christian temple. While, perchance, in tones divine, one awful question may have hovered over the pews where gentility slumbered, as the vision of neglected souls flashed before some startled spirit and the voice cried, "Where is thy brother?"

The argument is equally complete when it is granted that these sanctuaries are, in any sense, houses of GOD; or that their consecration has any real significance. For then, their one design is the glory of GOD, and not, primarily, the convenience of man. They are built indeed for us; but they are built, in a nobler and truer way, for Him. The SON of GOD was made man, for us men and for our salvation; but it was that thus the Father might be glorified in the redemption of His children. Stand, for a moment, as that sublime pageant rolls before you, in the dedication of the Jewish temple. See the smoke of the vast sacrifice ascend. Behold the mighty rivers of blood streaming from the altar. Hear the majestic prayer of inspiration as it goes up to heaven. See the assembled myriads gathered from every corner of the holy land. Now look again, with wondering awe, as the glory-cloud descends, and the Shekinah dwells within the veil, and the multitude own the very Presence of the GODHEAD, — which was it, GOD'S house or man's house? Can you imagine, a little later, that some Israelite should have asked, or sought to purchase, some little spot in that sacred structure for himself and family to worship there, that he might say of it, "So much of this place is mine"? Or, can you dream, without a sensation which would be midway between a smile and a shudder, that some collector should have gone throughout the tribes to gather a rental for their blessings in the temple of their GOD?

Take a far lower instance, and the argument is not

less conclusive in the sphere of holy reasoning. A synagogue had the feeblest measure of sacredness which any similar building could possess. There was no altar in such places. They were scarcely more than little edifices used for the gathering of very small congregations, ten men or a few more, where the law was read and expounded, and a few collects were offered. There were several hundred of these buildings in Jerusalem alone, at the time of our Lord's ministry. Now, can we imagine, even of such places, with no consecration other than the presence of the Scriptures might give, that men would dare to claim exclusive rights therein? Even there, would they have ventured to seek their own place, by right of purchase, or by a moneyed superiority and privilege?

One shrinks, at any rate, from pressing such questions as his thoughts glide on to those upper chambers where the little flocks were gathered, and the Holy Eucharist found constant celebration; or thence to the first rude Christian churches, or, those pagan temples rescued, like their votaries, and baptized in the Threefold Name; or thence to the great cathedrals where Christian art lent herself in graceful homage to Christian faith, or, even down to most recent times, when everywhere GOD'S children were all welcome guests in their Father's house, as the rich and the poor, the noble and the serf, knelt side by side, confessing the same sins, and seeking the same forgiveness from their one and only LORD. How great was the change, and how far-reaching its

issues, and oh, how sad its results, when men borrowed the wretched phrase from their journeyings or their sorriest pleasures, from the car or the theatre, and spoke of — GOD forgive the utterance if it should not come here — *hiring a seat* in the sanctuary of GOD!

It is no purpose of mine now, beloved, to trace the sad history of the pew system, or the evils to which it gave birth, or the harm and shame and loss which lie at its doors. It revolutionized, at last, in many a place and way, and always for woe, the whole parish idea. It degraded the priesthood, until the ambassador of Christ became only the paid servant of men. When the temple was hired, by a most natural association of ideas, the priest was hired also. Then direst temptations gathered about him, with those fearful enticements to seek popularity, to shine in culture or in social scenes, to hide part of his message, to be timid in the face of prejudices, to speak smoothly in the presence of guilt, to lower his office, to imperil his soul, ay, and the souls of all his people. This was but one great woe, from which the Church suffers fearfully in her ministry at the present time.

There was another, which came and which tarries, of which I must speak more plainly and more fully to-day. Public worship, and all which this involves, must be maintained, and at very large cost, in honor of Him to whom such worship is offered. If it were viewed manward, so to speak, — that is, as a device for human gratification or advantage, — even in its highest aspects, it might still be honorable to procure

it, and maintain it, with such economy as could be practiced. When it is viewed Godward, — knowing that the temple is His, that the worship is for Him, that the Sacraments bind souls to Him, or refresh them for a better service rendered unto Him; that instruction has its value here only as it wins, or warns, or helps souls in the way to Him, — then the plain, strong question for every man's conscience is this, How much, by utmost possibility, can I give or do for this temple of my LORD, and His worship and glory here? The pew system tended to suppress that question, to stifle it in every man's bosom, by its adjustments of prices and places, and all the plan of merchandise and traffic in the holy place, which it introduced. The question ceased to be a matter of conscience at all, and became one of exaction, — a demand to be met, not a sacred offering to be devoted on the altar of the LORD. The two systems forever suggest the two enquiries, How little will suffice? or, How much can possibly be offered? Between the two, so far as their spirit is concerned, there is the same interval as that which separates the angels of darkness and the angels of light. From the baser of these spirits we suffer most grievously, to-day, when it is found that the smallest offering which can find its noiseless way into the treasury of GOD is precisely that which is most likely to be presented. When every allowance has been made for the gifts of children, for the very poor, for the slender incomes and frequent offerings of many, which must be singly so small because so often brought, for other sacred

claims and objects which must be duly weighed and met, still, grave and sad must be his reflections who knows much of the weekly offertory in our churches. Again and again he is forced to ask himself, in view of the gifts and the givers, as he recounts them, how can this be? There are, it may be, six classes of men, easily grouped in the mind's reckoning, who can, each in its way, explain the melancholy result: —

1. There are those who give nothing unto GOD. They break that law of the olden time which said, Let no man appear empty before the LORD. They have come into His courts, but they have brought no presents unto Him. They have said their prayers, and sought His mercy for their souls and His bounty for their bodies and their homes; they have withholden from Him their alms and offerings. Or, they have come empty-handed and cold-hearted, perhaps only to gaze or to listen, and not even to pray. What mockery of GOD is here, to stand before Him and then to reject Him, refusing all His claim!

2. Some there are whose gifts are always, with them, matters of chance, and not of devout rule. They give little or much by no suggestion of conscience, but according to the mood or the convenience of the hour. If the inclination is feeble, and a small gift seems for the moment to suffice, it is offered, with no twinge of conscious guilt, in thus making one's duty to GOD the poor victim of one's own caprice.

3. Yet others give by *rule* indeed, — that rule which fixes the smallest sum which the weakest con-

science will allow, and steadily follows that dictate. It is a rule which controls and restricts the offering, and binds a man, not unto his GOD, in an ever-increasing devotion, but unto the poor standard of his least generous hour. It may lead him to give one tenth, not of what he *has*, but of what he *ought*.

4. They are not unknown, alas, who give to GOD precisely what is left when the other channels of outlay are fairly filled! GOD and His temple are always last in the plan of their expenditure, as though the parings and the leavings which fashion, or ease, or indulgence have not exacted were enough for the Holy Place and the Most High GOD. It is with their money as it is with their time all through the week: there is enough of it for the trash which lies on the parlor tables, enough for their friends, for the shops, for musical delight, for feasting and finery, for gossip anywhere, or idle dreams, and not thirty minutes in the livelong day when the needy soul may seek the Father's House, and bring its prayers and praises where the blessing of GOD is waiting. They give to Him only what self, the world, and the devil have not, in ways of respectable comfort, first seen fit to exact. With those three busy pleaders ever entreating, is it likely that much will be left?

5. There must be some who reason thus: Knowing that others give more than might be expected, it is for them to give just so much less, that GOD may not have more, at any rate, than their prudence

would suggest. Generosity in others is made the excuse for niggardliness in themselves, instead of proving the stimulus to their own increased benefactions. They would walk in the light of other men's candles, and save their own.

6. May it not be that a sixth class is found with them who live here, as in much beside, in the ways of careless proposing to do better, while the purpose never ripens into godly deed? They always say that they "hope to do more." You share in that hope most earnestly, while their sense of disappointment seems far less keen than your own. The temples of GOD will never be nobly maintained by the cheap resolutions or the kind wishes of men.

Time would fail me, beloved, nor would it be needful if the time were ample, further to review these sad phases of misdoing, whereby so much dishonor comes to the Christian name, and such sore trials surround many a parish in the Church of GOD. We know them far too well, and with a sadness which is never much relieved, although it must never lead to one moment's discouragement or dismay.

GOD has given you here a great work to do for Him. It is not greater or harder in the upholding and developing of your parish-life than you are fully able to meet, and accomplish, by that grace which is never refused. There must be courage, and steady zeal, and wise counsel, and patient self-sacrifice, and very large offerings of your substance unto Him from whom it all has come. Are you prepared, would you be willing, to offer Him less than these?

So far as in you lies, and from year to year, this church is wholly Free. You can say of it, in all its ministry of blessing, and in view of its constant streams of daily mercy, Whosoever will, let him hither come, and take the water of life freely. But you will say it to many who cannot, to more who will not, as yet, efficiently help you in the great burden of your parish debt and parochial needs. These should be right honestly met to the utmost of our present ability. It is our missionary work for GOD and His Church. Freely, yea wonderfully, has He hitherto helped us. Look at your full duty as good parishioners, or as Christ's true men; look at it as with eyes just turning from the holy cross, as just fixed upon the judgment throne; and then, whatsoever He — He, your Saviour and your Judge — shall say, oh, do it with your heart, and do it now, for His dear Church's sake, which is His Body and His Bride!